

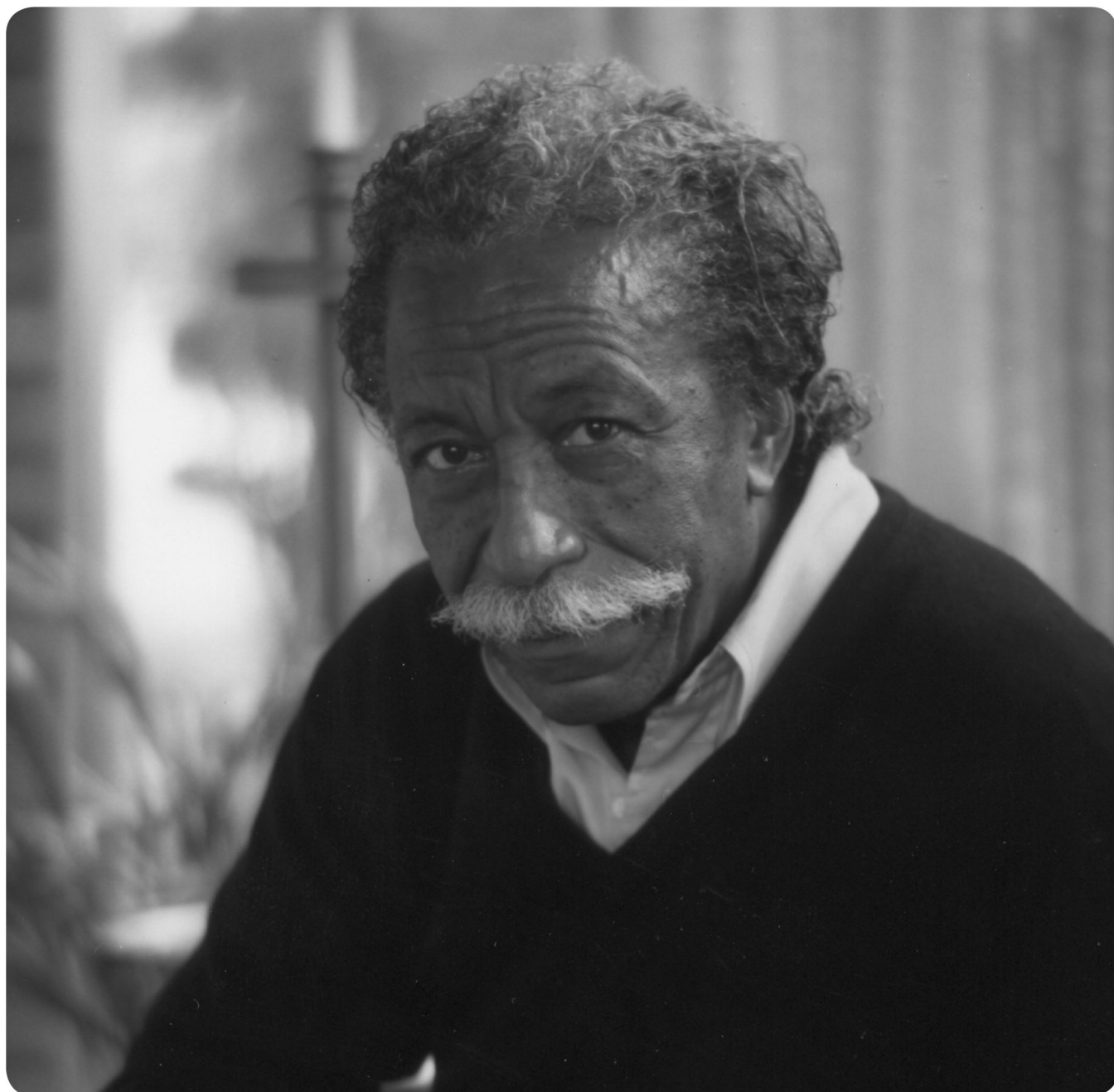


Read Kansas!

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By the Kansas State Historical Society

Famous Kansan



Gordon Parks
1912-2006



When Gordon Parks looked at the world he saw pictures and feelings. He knew this was a powerful way to tell stories. Parks grew up in Fort Scott at a time when African American children went to segregated schools. His parents worked hard to support their 15 children. The Parks family fought hatred and poverty, but their children learned to see the good in everyone. Parks' mother taught him that every experience was a chance to learn something new. She also taught him to stand up for his beliefs.

Gordon Parks' mother died when he was a teenager and he left Kansas. For a time he lived with his sister. Then he moved from one place to another trying to find work and a place where he felt comfortable. During this time Parks bought a used camera. Once he started using his camera, Parks discovered that often pictures could say more than words. Parks wanted his pictures to tell stories. He hoped that his camera would be a tool to help people see old things in new ways.



Gordon Parks' first job as a photographer was to take pictures of fashion models for a department store. Parks saw beauty and wealth that contrasted with his childhood of hatred and poverty. His photographs were put on exhibit and he was offered another job. Parks became the first African American photographer to work for the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C. It was here that Parks took one of his most famous photographs of a cleaning woman holding a broom and mop. She stood in front of a large American flag. Later Gordon Parks became the first African American photographer to be hired by a popular national magazine, *Life Magazine*.

Gordon Parks knew that words were another powerful way to tell stories. He began writing fiction and poetry to go with his photographs. He also wrote articles for magazines and newspapers.

In his lifetime Gordon Parks found a way to speak through pictures, words, and music. He took photographs. He wrote books. He directed movies. He even created a ballet to use the music he had heard in his head as a child. Because of his powerful images and words, people began to see things they had not seen before. Gordon Parks also led the way for other African American photographers, filmmakers, and authors.